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China Courts Africa With Aid, Projects

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BISSAU, Guinea-Bissau -- [China](#) paid for the marble and tile parliament building soaring above the crumbling homes of this former Portuguese colony, and is also promising a dam and a military hospital _ all with none of the political strings Western donors might attach.

Intent on cementing ties across Africa, China is active even in impoverished Guinea-Bissau, a small nation with little industry, no oil and few exports.

Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing ended a two-day visit here Thursday, part of a tour that includes Chad, Benin, Central African Republic, Eritrea and Mozambique. Li arrived from Equatorial Guinea, Africa's third-largest oil producer, where he agreed to forgive about \$75 million in debt.

Some nations on Li's itinerary are sources of the raw materials China's booming economy craves. Countries like Guinea-Bissau may not have much to offer today, but could in years to come. In courting them, China has turned on its head the Western aid formula that has tied public works projects to progress in good governance.

"China is not like the World Bank, they don't attach all these conditions on the money," said Edmundo Vaz, a former adviser to the Guinea-Bissau Finance Ministry who now runs a bank.

"The West makes us wait, but we're a poor country _ we don't have time wait," he said.

The Chinese strategy is especially troubling to countries like [France](#), traditionally a power in West Africa, said Valerie Niquet, a director at France's Institute for International Relations. France has a particular interest in Chad and Central African Republic, countries on Li's tour where stability has been undermined by violence in neighboring Darfur.

"China is not listening at all to the concerns that are being expressed by Paris on these development strategies," she said.

When asked about China's investment in nations with records of human rights abuses _ notably Sudan and the Central African Republic _ Li replied curtly: "Do you know what the meaning of human rights is? The basic meaning of human rights is survival _ and development."

Inside the parliament building, security guard Feliciano Balde said his country is better served by Chinese aid.

"In a corrupt country, it's better to come and build something big like this where the people can come to discuss politics," said the 42-year-old Balde. "At least this is something we can see. Other countries give us money, but the politicians eat it, and so people like me never see any of it."

Africa has become a crucial part of China's growth strategy. Trade between Africa and China has

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grown fourfold since 2001, topping \$45 billion in the first 10 months of last year. At a summit attended by 35 African heads of state in Beijing last fall, Chinese entrepreneurs signed deals worth \$1.9 billion with African governments and firms.

China has found a seemingly limitless market in Africa for its cheap goods. And oil-rich countries like Nigeria and Angola provide the natural resources China needs to sustain its rapid growth.

The imbalance between a superpower like China and a struggling West African country like Guinea-Bissau has prompted some to describe the Chinese overtures as the latest chapter in Africa's history of exploitation.

Ivan Nhuqui watched a Chinese construction crew working on another gift — a small subdivision of cinderblock homes for the military elite.

"It hurts me to see this. The construction is bad. It has no quality. And although the buildings are big compared to what we have, they're small compared to our sea," the 20-year-old said.

He referred to maritime treaties signed with China in recent years that give Chinese fishing vessels access to Guinea-Bissau's waters. Some say the treaties are the unofficial price for the new parliament building. It's a claim officials from both nations deny, but one that former U.S. Ambassador to Guinea-Bissau John Blacken says is not far-fetched.

"These buildings and things are basically tokens in return for the fishing agreements which are extremely beneficial to the Chinese," said Blacken, who estimates the Chinese have netted \$85 million worth of fish from the country's waters.

By contrast, the parliament building cost roughly \$6 million.

"What the government doesn't seem to understand is that they're being systematically robbed," Blacken said.

Prime Minister Aristides Gomes acknowledged an imbalance of power, but argued that the government can hold its own. "It's true that we come to negotiating table from a position of weakness," he said. "But we can't be fearful to the point of paralysis."

What is clear is that Chinese influence has seeped deeply into African soil.

On the pavement outside the building where the Chinese and the Guinean foreign ministers met to discuss the latest construction plans, Una Dang ekes out a living selling salted purple yams for 20 cents a serving.

"I don't really understand what they're doing here," she said, nodding toward a group of Chinese Embassy officials awaiting Li. "But why would I? My eyes are always gazing down, serving."

In her line of sight are her yams, arranged on a metal platter. She doesn't realize it, but the oval plate adorned with a motif of orange roses was made in China.

AP writers Rodrigo Angue Nguema in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, and Angela Doland in Paris contributed to this report.

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